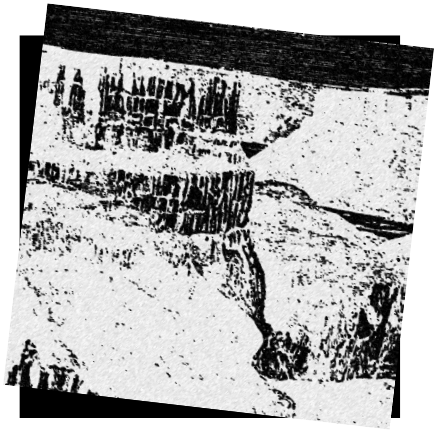
ADVENTURES IN THE PAST
Cultural Resource Information Series ▪ Number 2
Bureau of Land Management

An old woman was sitting with a willow basket filled with salmon. Coyote came to her tent. She boiled one fish for Coyote. Coyote ate it and liked its taste very much. When he finished eating, he stepped on the edge of the basket so that the salmon fell out and began to float down to Ross Fork Creek. Coyote ran along the bank till he got to a waterfall. There he made a dam to stop the fish, but the water broke the dam. Coyote ran down further and made another. Then he said to the salmon, "Every spring you must go up the mountains and spawn." That is why the salmon come here every spring.



AGAIDÜKA

Ancient Fishermen of Southern Idaho

–Northern Shoshoni legend recorded in 1908

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Additional information on the *Adventures in the Past* program can be obtained from:

District Archaeologist
Shoshone District
Bureau of Land Management
400 West F Street
Shoshone, Idaho 83352

Additional information on archaeology in southern Idaho can be obtained from any of the following:

Herrett Museum
College of Southern Idaho
P.O. Box 1238
Twin Falls, Idaho 83303

Idaho Museum of Natural History
Box 8096
Idaho State University
Pocatello, Idaho 83209

Idaho State Historical Society
210 Main Street
Boise, Idaho 83702

Idaho Archeology Society, Inc.
P.O. Box 7532
Boise, Idaho 83707

AGAIDÜKA (*a-guy-duka*): ANCIENT FISHERMEN OF SOUTHERN IDAHO

Prehistoric people in southern Idaho relied on many plants, animals, and fish for their survival. The technology used in ancient times to harvest, prepare, and store fish from southern Idaho waters is presented in this exhibit. The story about the techniques and importance of fishing is based on archaeological and ethnographic research, early historic records, and legends passed on by ancient people. This is an illustrated story which uses accurate replicas of artifacts found in archaeological sites and described in the literature.

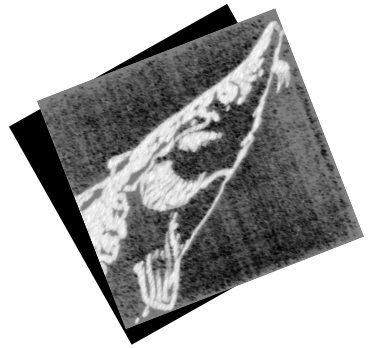
WHERE RIVERS GOUGED CANYONS INTO SOLID BASALT

The main geological feature of southern Idaho is the Snake River Plain. This broad, high-desert plain is wedged between the Columbia Plateau to the north and the Great Basin to the south. It was formed as massive sheets of basalt flowed from sources to the north and south.

Constant erosion and a spectacular ice-age flood carved deep canyons into this basalt. These canyons now drain water from the Rocky Mountain region.

Through the largest of these canyons flows the Snake River, called Biavahünu (*be-a-va-hun-u*) by the Shoshoni Indians. The Snake River begins in western Wyoming and eventually joins the Columbia River in Washington. As it flows through the southern and western portions of the state, it is joined by several major creeks, streams, and rivers. In places, the Snake River flows slowly through a wide, meandering channel. Occasionally it is funneled into narrow crevices with powerful rapids and spectacular waterfalls. The highest of these is Shoshone Falls, at 210 feet.

A WEALTH OF NATIVE FISHES

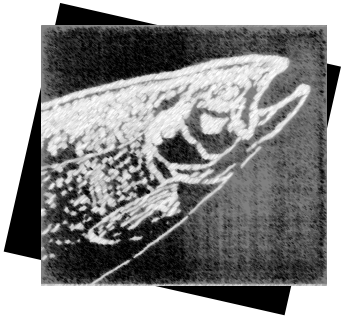


The waters of the Snake River were home to many species of native fresh water fish like trout, sturgeon, suckers, and whitefish. From identifiable bones in archaeological sites, as well as oral tradition, it is known that most species were harvested. Most early explorers, emigrants, and ethnographers did not record the details of how these native fish were collected, prepared, stored, and eaten. The ancient names for many of the species are unknown.

MIGRATIONS FROM THE PACIFIC

The Snake River was also used seasonally by ocean-going salmon that needed the fresh water for spawning grounds. Migrations of these fish, known as runs, were restricted to the western half of the Snake River because passage further upstream was blocked by Shoshone Falls. However, some species were able to migrate into north-central Idaho through the Salmon River.

Oral tradition and early written records indicate that three major salmon runs occurred each year. Steelhead trout made their first run in March or April. In May or June, the summer Chinook salmon entered southern Idaho. Late spring also saw the migrations of Sockeye, or Redfish, many of which reached Payette and Redfish Lakes in central Idaho. From September through November the Chinook salmon made a fall run. The largest of these migrations were the Chinook runs. These important fish lost much of their weight during their long journey from the ocean. By the time they reached Idaho's waters, they averaged from 8 to 20 pounds, the largest weighed 50 pounds. After spawning, the salmon (not the steelhead) died leaving their emaciated and battered bodies along the river banks providing food for other wildlife.



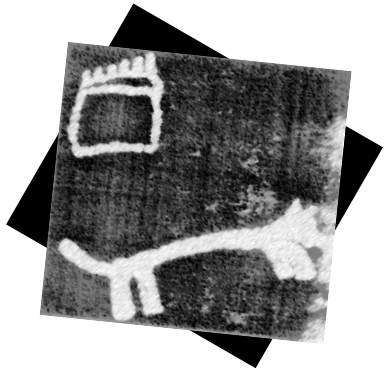
In most years, salmon were plentiful. Some years, because of low water, they failed to run into the Snake River Basin of southern Idaho. The quantity and quality varied from year to year as well as in the different runs. How long ago these runs first started is not known. However, through time the runs diminished in size and frequency. Today the Snake River Basin salmon runs are nearly extinct.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Archaeologists generally agree that humans first entered Idaho sometime prior to 12,000 years ago. This ancient past of Idaho has been divided into three general time periods – the Paleo-Indian, Archaic, and Historic.

The earliest is called the Paleo-Indian period. It lasted from 12,000 to 7,000 years ago. Paleo-Indians were immigrants from eastern Asia who crossed into North America in pursuit of now-extinct, ice age mammals such as mammoth, camels, giant bison, and ground sloth. Evidence of these first Idahoans can be found in beautifully worked stone weapons called Clovis points such as those found at the Simon Site near Fairfield. Further evidence was found deep inside Wilson Butte Cave, north of Eden. There, an ancient fire hearth containing burnt bones of extinct bison and camel, and stone tools, was dated at 10,500 years old. Around this time, Clovis points gave way to the smaller Folsom points. These are found across the southern part of the state and were used to hunt bison.

Around 7,000 years ago a climatic change and other factors caused the mass extinctions of the large animals that had previously roamed across southern Idaho. A new lifestyle began to emerge marking the end of the Paleo-Indian period. The "Archaic Period," from 7,000 to 300 years ago, saw more diverse food procurement activities. Hunting, fishing, and gathering provided the food and new techniques and tools enabled a more intense use of Idaho's natural resources. During this time period many new inventions appeared in archeological sites, such as the atlatl (*spearthrower*), basketry, fiber cordage, and seed grinders. Near the end of the Archaic period, pottery and the bow and arrow appeared.



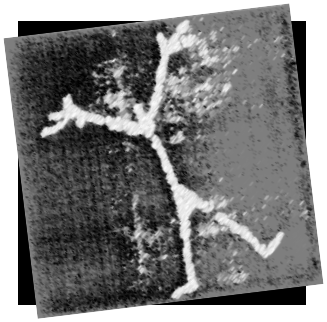
Although many archaeological sites in southern Idaho have been excavated, few have revealed notable evidence of fishing. Spears, nets, hooks, baskets, and drying racks were usually made of wood, bone, and fibrous materials which easily decay. Skeletal remains of most fishes are small and delicate and are seldom preserved. Backbones (*vertebrae*) and scales are sometimes preserved in sufficient quantity and condition to allow identification of species and dating of the remains.

Fish remains have been dated from nine archaeological sites. Some are nearly 7,000 years old. These include Schellbach Cave, Kanaka Rapids, 10-GG-273, 10-GG-278, 10-GG-1, 10-TF-352, Three Island Crossing, and the Clover Creek Site, all on the Snake River, Nahas Cave in the Owyhee Uplands, and Dry Creek Rockshelter in the Boise Foothills. A few bits and pieces of fish line, netting, bone barbs, and hooks have also been recovered. An important exception to this scarcity of fishing gear was found in Schellbach Cave, near Swan Falls Dam, where harpoon points, net sinkers, a fishhook, and fish line were found. In addition, stone fences which served as part of large fish traps still can be seen in the Snake River below Hagerman Valley.

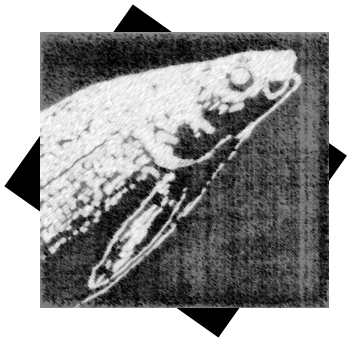
The final period in Idaho prehistory is marked by the introduction of the horse and influx of Euro-American people from 300 to 100 years ago. The previous 7,000 years of prehistory, which saw little cultural change, came to an abrupt end as influences from a new culture spread rapidly across the West. Trappers, explorers,

missionaries, ranchers, farmers, and soldiers brought many changes. Trade goods, firearms, new varieties of food, and textiles were embraced by the native inhabitants. Disease, starvation, and reservations changed traditional lifeways. The construction of dams brought an end to the migratory runs and to salmon fishing on the Snake River.

THEY CALLED THEMSELVES...



Because our archeological evidence identifies people by artifact type, not by name, scholars do not agree on the origin and identity of Idaho's ancient people. Several theories have been proposed including one which suggests that the Shoshonean people came to Idaho only within the last few thousand years, replacing other Great Basin people who came here earlier. Another theory suggests that there has been little cultural change in the last 10,000 years and the Shoshoni were the first and only inhabitants. In the first written accounts, it was reported that the Indians in the Snake River Basin referred to themselves by several different names although they spoke the same language. The names used by each group referred to the major food collecting activity practiced in their "home" territory. Thus, if in the homeland they hunted rabbits, they called themselves Rabbit Eaters or Kumadüka (*ku-ma-duka*). If they hunted mountain sheep, they were Mountain Sheep Eaters or Tukudüka (*tu-ku-duka*). Ground Hog eaters were Yahandüka (*ya-han-duka*). Those who ate salmon (*agai*) were the Salmon Eaters or Agaidüka. Together, they called themselves Neme (*ne-me*) or people. The name Shoshoni was given to them by the whites.



A ROUND OF SEASONS

The Indians who lived in southern Idaho spent much of each year on the move from one food resource to another. Each season brought forth varieties of nuts, seeds, roots, and berries. Wildlife was the food of choice during certain seasons. The seasonal movement from one food resource to another is called the "seasonal round." In southern Idaho this strategy was elaborate and required people to move from low elevations in the cooler months to higher elevations in the spring and summer. The seasonal runs of migratory fish were an important influence on this movement of people. They collected camas on the Camas Prairie when it was ready, and fish from the Snake River when they were abundant.

EARLY CONTACTS

When explorers and trappers first entered southern Idaho, they met many native people. Some adventurers took the time to record their colorful observations and experiences. Some descriptions appear to be accurate, while others are fanciful or derogatory. Surviving documents describe many facets of daily life of the native peoples. From early eye witness accounts recorded in journals, and scientific studies by ethnographers, it appears that many Shoshoni of western Idaho spent much of the year near streams where salmon could be taken. Several writers indicate that fishing was an important subsistence activity.

On the Snake River, probably in the section between Shoshone Falls and Salmon Falls, the Astoria party saw a number of dwellings which, in October 1811,

> *"were very comfortable; each had its pile of wormwood at the door for fuel, and within was abundance of salmon, some fresh, but the greater part cured… About their dwellings were immense quantities of the heads and skins of salmon, the best part of which had been cured, and hidden in the ground." Along this part of the river, the shores were "lined with dead salmon." "There were signs of buffalo having been there, but a long time before."*

On August 25 they saw about 100 lodges of Shoshoni fishing at Salmon Falls. On the northern side of the river below Salmon Falls they

> *"passed several camps of Shoshonies, from some of whom they procured salmon, but in general they were too wrechtedly poor to furnish anything."*

At Salmon Falls, in August 25, 1812, the Astoria party

> *"saw Shoshonies busily engaged killing and drying fish. The salmon begin to leap shortly after sunrise. At this time the Indians swim to the center of the falls, where some station themselves on rocks, and others stand to their waists in the water, all armed with spears [harpoons], with which they assail the salmon as they attempt to leap, or fall back*

exhausted… Mr. Miller, in the course of his wanderings, had been at these falls, and had seen several thousand salmon taken in the course of one afternoon"

At the same falls, Fremont, 1842, observed that in the spring the salmon were so abundant,

"that they merely throw in their spears at random, certain of bringing out a fish."

The Indians were paddling about in

"boats made of rushes."

In 1842 Fremont mentioned no camps above Salmon Falls, but saw several at the falls and below it.

"We now very frequently saw Indians, who were strung along the river at every little rapid where fish are to be caught."

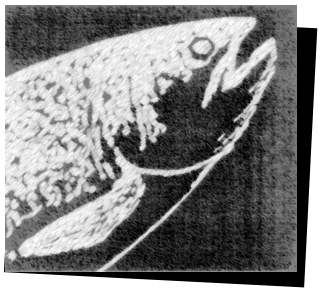
He described the Shoshoni at Salmon Falls as

"poor" and "but slightly provided with winter clothing; there is but little game to furnish skins for the purpose; and of a little animal which seemed to be most numerous, it required twenty skins to make a covering to the knees… [the Indians] grow fat and become poor with the salmon…" and lived in "semicircular huts made of willow, thatched over with straw and open to the sunny south."

HOW FISH WERE TAKEN

The frequent movement of small groups of people across the countryside did not allow much opportunity for social interaction. However, fishing was one activity that did.

Many families would gather at good fishing sites, some cooperating in constructing dams and weirs, others fished alone with spears, hooks, and other devices. Others would assist in the drying of the catch for winter use.



Fishing places were not "private property" as we understand it today. Ownership of fishing places was based upon use. In effect, the fishing place was owned because it was used by a group. Fishing rights were shared as long as permission was granted from the current user. In fact, people were encouraged to visit good places. When a dam or weir was built, four or five families cooperated in its construction under the direction of a person with the necessary knowledge. The director was called kuwadangkhani (*ku-wa-da-ngk-ha-ni*).

"The kuwadangkhani was considered to be the owner of the dam. He took the responsibility of visiting the dam to remove the fish from the basket traps and of distributing them among the people who had assisted him. For his trouble he kept the greater share of the catch. Dams and weirs were rebuilt each year. If the director died any other competent person took charge."

"Construction of fish weirs involved several families. Weirs were built on the Lemhi River and other tributaries but not in the Salmon River. Usually three or four families cooperated. Other persons sometimes stole the catch or even parts of the weir, but nothing was done about it. For construction of more ambitious weirs, especially in the Lemhi River, about 20 families cooperated, erecting their tepees on the bank at each end of it. A man was stationed at each end of the weir to watch for the fish while the people danced. When the fish came he requested a number of men to go along the weir and help him remove the fish. They strung the fish on willows and carried them to shore, distributing them among the families…"

FISHING DEVICES

Many ingenious artifacts and techniques were developed to harvest fish from southern Idaho waters. Individuals fished with nets, traps, baskets, hooks and line, and harpoons of many varieties. Most fishing implements were made of bone or wood and were assembled using fiber cordage, sinew, and resinous glues (made from pine pitch) and sealants.

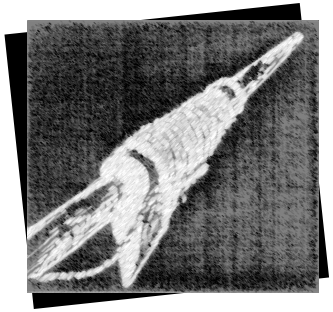
The most important fishing implement was the harpoon. They ranged in size from seven to 14 feet in length and had detachable, composite points attached to the shaft by loose cords. The shaft was often a single pole with a serviceberry or greasewood foreshaft and prongs.

"The fish-spear is a beautiful adaptation of an idea to a purpose. The head of it… is of bone, to which a small strong line is attached near the middle, connecting it with the shaft, about two feet from the point. Somewhat toward the forward end of this head, there is a small hole, which enters it ranging acutely toward the point of the head; it is quite shallow. In this hole the front end of the shaft is placed. This head is about two and a half inches long, the shaft about ten feet, and of light willow. When a salmon or sturgeon is struck, the head is at once detached by the withdrawal of the shaft, and being constrained by the string, which still connects it with the operator, turns its position to one crosswise of its direction while entering. If the fish is strong, the staff is relinquished, and operates as a buoy to obtain the fish when he has tired down by struggling."

– Alexander Wyeth, along the Snake River, 1851

Dip nets were made from willow rods bent into circular hoops about three feet in diameter. Cone-shaped nets hung from the hoops. With these, fishermen, sometimes standing on wooden scaffolds, scooped fish from small streams. Similar nets with two handles were used in rapids to catch fish.

> *"A scoop net without handles was held by a man wading in a small stream; other persons drove the fish to him. This net had a willow rim and cord made of a red-bark plant."*
>
> *–Alexander Ross, Lemhi River, 1855*



Lifting nets consisted of two long poles fastened together with a rectangular section of netting gathered at one end. These worked somewhat like a purse, with the fisherman manipulating the poles to open and close the bag.

Seine nets were made from nettle or wild flax. The net was about 8 feet wide and 10–15 feet long. Net sinkers were made from river cobbles with a shallow groove pecked around the middle, or smooth round cobbles wrapped with rushes and bound at both ends. Net floats kept the net in a vertical position in the water.

Seine nets were used for fishing on a large scale. On the Snake River near Fort Hall in 1811, the Astoria party observed a

> *"seine neatly made with meshes in the ordinary manner, of the fibers of wild flax or nettle".*

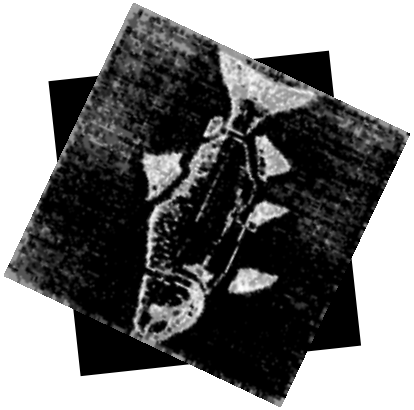
Similar nets on the Lemhi River were 8–10 feet square, had stone weights, and were held by ropes at the corners by four swimmers or men on balsa rafts. Some seine nets were as much as 50–60 feet long and 15 feet wide. These larger nets had a vertical pole guide at each end, 10 wooden floats tied to their upper edges, and grooved stone sinkers tied to their lower edges. The floats were about four feet long and several inches in diameter.

Weirs were made of willow poles planted vertically in the stream bed, or stone fences. The simplest weirs were straight or angled fences to stop the movement of fish. More complex weirs could involve multiple fences, raceways, and traps of many forms.

> *"I have not observed that the Indians often attempt fishing in the 'big river,' where it is wide and deep; they generally prefer the slues, creeks, etc. Across these, a net of closely woven willows is stretched, placed vertically, and extending from the bottom to several feet above the surface. A number of Indians enter the water about a hundred yards above the net, and walking closely, drive the fish in a body against the wicker work. Here they frequently become entangled, and are always checked; the spear is then used dexterously, and they are thrown out, one by one, upon the shore."*
>
> *– John Townsend, Ontario, Oregon, 1855*

Baited hooks were frequently used in southern Idaho. The most common form was a small, bi-pointed piece of bone tied in the center to a length of line. A more elaborate variety involved two barbs which twisted in a cross-wise position when swallowed. Bone hooks which resembled modern hooks were also used. Single hooks were employed although it was common to use multiples with as many as several dozen hooks attached to a single line.

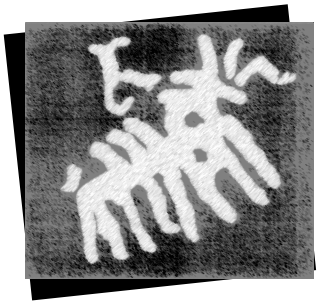
STORING, COOKING, & PRESERVING FISH



Fish were prepared by first being butchered using sharp stone flakes or stone knives with handles made of wood or bone. Two different butchery techniques were used. In the first, the head, tails, fins, and organs were removed and some of them eaten almost immediately. Eggs or roe were considered a delicacy and eaten raw much like caviar today. The body was cut into three sections – first lengthwise, then the lower sides were separated. In the second method, the head, tail, and fins were removed, but the body was split in half lengthwise.

Fish were then air dried, boiled in clay pots, baked in earthen pits, or smoked. Air drying was most common and smoking was the least common form of preparation. Prepared fish were eaten fresh or ground into a flour, then stored in bags made of fish skins. The meat was also combined with vertebrae, roe, and berries or other vegetable material then pulverized into a paste, formed into small cakes, and sun-dried into pemican. Pemican could be stored for a long time. Cooked or dried fish were eaten fresh or stored for use later in the year. Dried fish were bundled with cord into bales.

LOOKING INTO A CLOUDY PAST

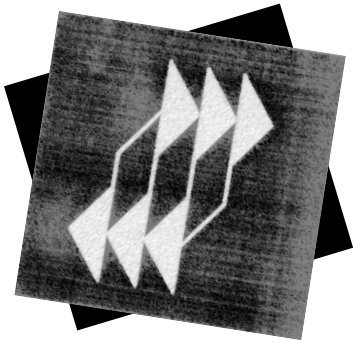


The evidence presented in this exhibit indicates that fishing was a major activity in the seasonal search for food for Idaho's Native Americans. Not all anthropologists agree on this issue. Recently, some scholars have reexamined the evidence and suggested that although fishing was important, the unpredictability of the runs and questionable nutritional value of the resource would have made fish a less attractive

part of the seasonal round than is often assumed. These scholars ask why little archaeological evidence of fishing has been found, and why so few tales even mention fishing activities.

Critics argue that many of the sites which could have provided evidence have been destroyed by modern development or vandalism. They also contend that while the evidence of fishing is sparse, this may be due to poor preservation of the remains.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING



Many good references provide information on the ancient inhabitants of southern Idaho, and the techniques and implements they used for fishing. Below are the basic sources used in the preparation of this exhibit. A fully referenced exhibit narrative is available by writing the Herrett Museum.

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